

The Americans and the Tenth International Congress

BY

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ON August 4, 1890, during the first, and largest, general meeting of the Tenth International Congress, there were three universal and spontaneous outbursts of applause. The first and most sympathetic greeted the name of James Paget, and never was there an ovation more deserved. The second rang through the immense building when it was announced that the government of the French Republic had sent thirty-four official delegates, and that nearly one hundred and fifty more Frenchmen had joined the Congress. They had overcome political enmity and jealousy, disregarded a rather slighting reference to their "national insanity" of twenty years ago, and came with open hearts and friendly feelings, a large number of them men of fame and high rank. The third greeted the announcement of the fact that on the first day of the gathering, more than six hundred Americans were inscribed on the rolls. This recognition afforded to our name must

¹ Being an introduction to special reports of Delegates to the Congress before the New York Academy of Medicine, November 6, 1890.

have flattered the national pride of everyone of us who was present.

This hearty welcome was more than I had mustered the courage to expect. For, indeed, Americans visiting Europe on such occasions as this labor under certain difficulties. Europeans do not quite understand our country, its political and social configuration or its scientific attainments. If that be so even in Great Britain, both race and language being identical and mutual intercourse more frequent, how much less can we expect it to be known on the Continent. Besides, it is not always the best political, social, and scientific class of our fellow-citizens who travel extensively, and though it be not the crowd of the "profanum vulgus" that ought to tell in the estimation of the best spirit of their country, it does so tell. Now, the majority of medical Americans they know in Europe, and particularly in Germany, belong to one of two classes: either they are *bona fide* students, whom, being mere foreigners, they consent to matriculate even without the preliminary education rigorously insisted upon in their own young countrymen, or they are our young doctors who pass a few months or a year in European laboratories and clinics for the sake of special studies. It is these latter that are also the occasional participants in their national associations, where, nobody else being present, they are naturally considered the representatives of American medicine. Our best men travel little and talk less. Indeed, some of those who were most fit to represent us in the Congress kept in the rear, modest and retiring. Besides, the great opportunity America might have had to present to the view of the world whatever there is great and progressive in American medicine appears lost. For in the very number of the *German Medical Weekly* which was published in the week of the Congress you could, in the history of previous congresses, read the statement that the Washington Congress was unfortunately a failure, for which all of us, being Americans, are held responsible. Moreover, though English is read by a great many of

the best men in Europe, the knowledge of our language is not so general as to insure a wide acquaintance with our literature through anything but the uncertain channels of extracts or translations. Nor are even these well selected. We are all aware that our medical journals are of as unequal rank as our schools, and not infrequently will you find a journal which is deservedly unknown among us quoted in Europe under the impression that it is a fair representative of American medical literature. Nor is the treatment Europeans receive at our hands always very courteous or considerate. The editorial remarks of a great New York weekly were quoted as unkind, inasmuch as the efforts to make the Congress international and Berlin a neutral ground for the whole world, did not appear to be appreciated by us. It must be admitted, though, they did not deem that Western journal worthy of serious consideration which spoke of the Tenth International Congress as a congress of snobs, and advised everyone of the forty thousand practitioners of the Mississippi Valley, "everyone superior to the leaders of the Congress," to stay at home.

Public opinion is often made or unmade by trivialities ; sometimes, indeed, by personalities of an inferior nature. It was a source of complaint in Berlin that an American who had been honored with the request to represent our country by delivering one of the great addresses had neglected to see to it that his refusal reached the Committee of Organization in anything like due time. The proverbial courtesy of Americans was found wanting, and that at a time of feverish excitement and overwork. Such occasions are the very opportunities for those formerly Europeans who manage to rise, in their own estimation, and that of their former countrymen, by detraction of us. For there are those who do not immediately succeed, when they, our guests and future fellow-citizens, arrive among us, in impressing us with their superiority, or in being appreciated by us as they are by themselves, or in obtaining at once a lucrative practice and professional

positions and honors. It is they who pay for the hospitality proffered by our country, with shoulder-shrugging insinuations and pitying remarks upon our crudeness and inferiority, our "mob rule," our "civilized barbarism," instead of aiding in the realizations of the national and cosmopolitan aims of the medical profession and science.

Nothing is so small as not to have some effect. Unfortunately, there is still so much national jealousy everywhere that faults and shortcomings in your neighbor beyond the boundary line are easily believed in, and slanderers and libellers are always busy. When I arrived in Germany, a newspaper article was shown me which was concocted by a sectarian practitioner formerly in New York, who detailed the inferiority of American medicine, schools, and practice to the horrified sanctity of the German public; and in the very week preceding the Congress, hundreds, or perhaps thousands, of pamphlets were distributed in Berlin, for the avowed purpose of insulting us and making us uncomfortable. The pseudonymous author, who appears to have lived, or lives, in Chicago, says, among a great many other things, the following :

"In reference to the transatlantic gentlemen, nothing is more out of place than indulgence. American tolerance, so frequently extolled, exists for Americans only. When about to travel they leave it at home. It is almost always the result of ignorance, indifference, and bad conscience. As the average American never cares for the history of a science, the majority of the transatlantic members of the International Congress are totally unacquainted with European institutions, labors, and scientific methods and their aims. Nevertheless, everyone of these gentlemen carries a paper in his pocket, easily compiled, wherewith to resuscitate the obsolete science of Europe."

In the same sheet the man asserts that forty-two per cent. of all the doctors in Chicago are professed abortionists and a great many followers of "Christian Science."

Some of the great Germans, with whose names every-

one of us is perfectly familiar, denied being in any way influenced by such rubbish ; but then, again, it was through them that I was informed of a New York specialist, and a fellow of this Academy, who was reported to have availed himself of his personal intimacy with the officers of the Associated Press for the purpose of having his Congress paper served at the breakfast-tables of a million of American households on the day of its delivery. That was a week before the opening.

Thus, you see, Mr. President, American medical gentlemen may meet with difficulties in the face of such occurrences. Still, though they are as human on the other side of the Atlantic as we on this, the facilities of communication between the continents have become such as to enable those wishing to see and know the truth that the time when American medicine was merely receptive and imitative has long passed by, and that we have entered the arena as co-operating peers. They were, indeed, anxious to have us and secure a large American attendance. In order to accomplish that end the organizing committee appointed an American committee, which was to enlist universal sympathy in our country. No time was to be lost, and the first ten medical men who expressed their willingness to serve were appointed. The territorial jealousy, one of the most marked American littlenesses, which found its way into print several times, has obliged me to explain publicly, in the May meeting of the Association of American Physicians, why that committee consisted of Stewart, Fitz, Lusk, Draper, Hun, Pepper, Busey, Osler, and Peyre Porcher. Will the Western gentlemen who found fault with the committee, and heaped vituperation on the mode of its composition, tell us that the names selected did not deserve the honor conferred upon them, or that there are better ones among us? Does American medicine begin at the Alleghanies or the Sierra? Or will you, gentlemen of Ohio, Mississippi, or Nevada, tell us which of the forty-four stars of the glorious flag is the one you claim as

yours? Yours are the forty-four, so they are ours. Are your minds not big enough, your hearts not large enough to embrace the love of, and the pride in, the whole flag of America?

A further proof of the anxiety to secure the co-operation and good-will of the Americans was given by the Berlin committee in this, that they insisted upon one of the public addresses in the general meetings being delivered by an American. Weir Mitchell having declined in time and courteously, and Osler not being within reach, I was telegraphically directed to select an orator. The choice of Horatio C. Wood was heartily approved of in Berlin and elsewhere. Again, a few have asked why a New Yorker could not have been honored with that commission? That question is answered by some other queries: Do you know of a better man? Is America bounded by the East and North Rivers? And lastly, has New York forgotten that she can afford to be courteous and generous?

More, a few weeks only before the meeting of the Congress the American orthopedists expressed the desire that there should be a separate section of orthopedics. When I, then already in Europe, was notified of that request by the Chairman of the Orthopedic Section of this Academy, and expressed my fear lest it might be too late to make arrangements for that change, I was by returning mail informed by the Secretary-General that the request was at once granted by the Committee of Organization, on the ground that my countrymen must know best what suited them and their scientific labors.

Again, the organization of the Congress was not completed without the election of an American vice-president, John S. Billings, and an American, M. Allen Starr, as one of the two English-speaking secretaries, and a large number of American vice-presidents of sections. And lastly, when, on the third day of Congress and in the second general meeting, the hour grew late and the audience melted under the hot sun, Dr. Wood's address was,

out of consideration for the Americans, postponed to be the first topic of the third meeting, though the hour and arrangements and printed preparations had to be changed accordingly.

All this was meant, and was believed to suffice, to make every American feel at home. If it did not succeed, it ought to have accomplished that end. But I have been told that disappointments have been keenly felt and complaints been uttered.

When an English paper was read, many have been reported to have left the room. Many essays were not read at all, some were not allowed the time required by the authors, some men would read beyond the legal limits. Such comments are natural, but also their causes. The unprecedented number of papers offered at a late date, and too courteously accepted, and some acoustic disadvantages of many of the audience halls, are among the causes of disappointments, which are unavoidable in everything human. The experience of the past can furnish remedies in the future. However, when one man complains that he was not one among the five per cent. of members who could be admitted to the court reception in Potsdam ; another, that he had to pay for his share of the section dinner on the evening of Wednesday, the 6th, proclaiming that matters were different in Washington, where no foreigner paid anything ; it proves one of two things, either that there were those who went more for the incidental appurtenances of the Congress than the Congress, or that our national failing, which is a highly developed emotional hyperæsthesia, was rather demonstrative. I can assure those who are finding fault with the scantiness of their enjoyments that I know of one at least who neither shared in the entertainment in the City Hall, for which Berlin paid 80,000 marks, nor danced at any of the five balls, nor imbibed the music and songs in eleven languages, and as many beverages, at Kroll's, and—did not feel the worse for it the following mornings. If I have any fault to find, it is with the overflow of enter-

tainments, the excess of generosity, the multiplicity of luncheons, dinners, and receptions, the waste of money in the vast number of public and private social gatherings.

If there ever were hosts spending unstintingly—aye, squandering—money in the service of unlimited hospitality they were the profession as a whole, and the single medical men of Berlin.

In connection with this fact let me make a remark, which is dictated by no cavilling spirit, that I have too many reasons to appreciate the universal kindness and untiring hospitality of the great and gentlemanly members of the Berlin profession, who were bent on nothing so much as rendering the sojourn of the foreign guests comfortable and pleasant. I must here mention the names of Virchow, Bergman, Waldeyer, Gerhardt, Henoch, Martin, and Leyden, and his accomplished wife, the Chairman of the Ladies' Committee, and could name a host of others. Many of us have found it impossible to respond at the same time to the requirements of actual congressional duties and the urgent demands of hospitable courtesy. In this, also, there is discomfort and loss for the individual member. But the matter has a very much more important aspect. An excess of social entertainments on one hand, and the accomplishment of the end for which the International Congress is convened on the other, are incompatible at a certain point. Too many feasts interfere with legitimate work. The expectation of a good time may—if I must not say it does—invite the attendance of many, of hundreds, perhaps of thousands, who would not go for the sake of work. On the other hand, those who have gone for the latter are liable to feel sorely disconcerted. Thus it has happened—at least this disappointment can be held in part responsible—that the national associations have suffered from the persistent absence of those who do not wish to lose great opportunities; and that all over America, Great Britain, France, Germany, and other countries there have been formed by

dissatisfied men, who place scientific work over any distractions, be they ever so pleasant, special societies, the objects of all of which ought to have been accomplished in the sections of the general bodies. It would be a sad development if the same tendency were to grow up in international congresses. This very moment, there are already in existence an international ophthalmological and an otological congress. It would be the fault of the management of international medical congresses, if other specialities, or doctrines, should follow the example, for no other reason than the predominance of the social over the scientific element. If the latter cease to rule the great men of science will stay away, and the holiday-seekers and a few ambitious office-holders will remain. *Experientia docet.*

It is only a wealthy city and rich professional men who can entertain as Berlin did. For such hospitality as was displayed there you require large and generous hearts, ample and well-filled purses. There are but few communities like her. If the habit of prodigality becomes persistent we shall be received in future with misgivings on the part of our hosts, who must fear lest their efforts fall short both of the results of predecessors and the expectations of the guests. Let these two calamities occur—viz., the absence of the best men of all nations, and on the part of cities and men hesitation to request our coming—what will become of the International Congresses?

And where is the prevention of the danger alluded to? Here: Let the social entertainments be reduced to a minimum. Then any city with ample hotel accommodations will be able to receive us, though we be thousands. Then those bent upon pleasure only will seek it elsewhere. Then the numbers will no longer be unwieldy and shapeless. Then the men looking for work, and for the men who work, will be eager to come and see and be seen, to teach and to be taught.

The unprecedented success of the American Congress of Physicians and Surgeons, the first meeting of which

was held in Washington, in September, 1888, tells its own tale and exhibits the proof of what I say. In my mind there is no doubt that its second meeting, in September, 1891, will be equally successful; its three days will be dedicated to work, and the official social entertainment limited to a plain subscription banquet. In that way neither the lawful work of the Congress nor private intercourse and hospitality are interfered with.

It may appear invidious to mention the co-operative services rendered by the members of the different nations represented in the various sections of the Congress. Still as we generally have a good opinion of ourselves, we are not afraid of looking back at our own contributions to the scientific material that was furnished. When we do so we have to admit, however, that but a small percentage of our seven hundred participated in the general work. It is true there was one who got himself delivered of quintuplets; fortunately, he had no equals, and he was not, as a medical journal reported, "taken in earnest." Still, there were a number of papers, not compiled, but original. The Orthopedic Section was American to a great extent. The Neurological had a very fair representation from our country. The Gynecological and Pediatric Sections were not without American contributions. The Surgical was supplied with papers which were highly appreciated, mostly from the West. Indeed, there were but few sections in which no American took part, though there were some in which no active work at all was furnished by us. The most redeeming feature was the meeting of the combined Laryngological and Pediatric Sections, in which the ingenuous, painstaking, and successful efforts of O'Dwyer were heartily applauded.

After all, however, the labor performed in the general sessions may be the principal, but is certainly not the only, object in view. An English journal has said that "congresses are not instruments of research;" and still, the transactions of all are replete with it. It is true a congress is not so much meant for new discoveries as for the

broad dissemination of facts, hints, and ideas. A man—not being ubiquitous—may not take away with him many things new, but what he carries home is a new stimulus and encouragement.

In the Congress you saw a great many men whom you thought you knew, but since you listened to them and watched them while you listened and took their measure, you know better now. You saw and heard the living objects of your admiration, the moulders of professional thought in all countries; discoverers, teachers, laboratory workers, practitioners; those who, after hard work, create books by spontaneous generation out of their brains, and those who compile them out of their pigeon-holes; the eagles, the bees, and the moles—also the parrots, and that class of envious cuckoos who transfer other birds' eggs into their own nests. You found there is room in our great army for many men and many classes of men. You gathered encouragement from learning that even truly great men are still men and human; and that some degree of greatness is within the grasp of any man, in town or village, who will work for it intelligently, bravely, and honorably. All this is what a congress will teach those who consent to learn.

There is another lesson that is taught by a congress: The separation into twenty sections proves the endless and diversified branching of the grand old tree of medical science. Their working under the same roof, however, and under the same administration; their occasional combination for a common purpose; their gathering in general meetings, and their listening to the same addresses, with the same interest and profit—all this, in spite of the fact that some of the twenty appear to be threatened with the danger of degenerating into mere handicraft, proclaim louder than steeple bells that medical science is “one and indivisible, now and forever.”

The Congress has conveyed to me, like its predecessors in Copenhagen and London, a great lesson, and furnished an elevating spectacle. Imagine, those of you who have

not been present, thousands of medical men from all parts of the world, and speaking a dozen different languages, not perhaps endowed with the same erudition or mental or moral power, but moved by the same instincts and interests, and assembling at the same call and for the same special purpose. The great and the lowly, the old and young meet as brethren on the same platform, if not of equality, still of fraternity and solidarity. National jealousy and prejudice are shelved for at least a week, and the lesson is taught that brethren may live together peaceably under the same roof, an example to the nations both of the present and the future. The man and the man of science are appreciated and loved, though political adversaries. Applause takes the place of hisses. The contest is no longer against each other but with each other, side by side, arm in arm, with the same weapons of the brain and soul against the common enemy of science and mankind, viz., physical deterioration and social misery. Thus the cosmopolitan spirit of coming centuries is foreshadowed and initiated by the co-operation of the men arrayed in the army of the noblest of all sciences and professions. Therefore, may no man who can prove an example to his peers in this or any other country, no man who can teach, none who can learn, none who can worthily represent his country in any capacity and do honor to America among foreigners—may no man, except for valid reasons, ever shirk his duty to attend an International Medical Congress.